

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, R.I.

**CNN EFFECT:**

**A DIRECT PATH TO THE AMERICAN CENTER OF GRAVITY?**


by

Bernard W. Kasupski III

Lieutenant Commander, U.S. Navy

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of the Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract of

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Recent technological advances made in the independent reporter's equipment and his virtual real time capability to transmit his images anywhere in the world has lead to an almost universal access to the media. This resultant globalization of the media, it has been argued, has served to dramatically heighten the media's influence over the American public and world opinion. In turn, many observers of international affairs have grown concerned over the media's apparent impact on American diplomacy and foreign policy. A concern borne out of what has been coined the "CNN Effect" – "whereby emotive images of suffering are presumed to lead to a near-automatic public demand to do something."<sup>1</sup> Probably the most telling and often cited example centered on Somalia whereby:

The wrenching television images of starving Somali women and children were a factor in persuading President Bush to send in troops to assist in the distribution of relief supplies. Images of a dead American soldier, one of eighteen killed in a firefight, being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu as crowds of Somalis jeered, were a factor in persuading Clinton to order the withdrawal of those troops.<sup>2</sup>

Considering the politically sensitive nature of the "limited wars," peace operations, and humanitarian assistance endeavors that today's military finds itself involved with, public support for their sustainment is more critical than ever. Whereby in the military parlance the "CNN Effect" also refers to the capability of videotaped "tactical" events having "strategic" consequences, it would seem tomorrow's operational commanders would necessarily pay considerably more attention to the media. They must be prepared to tell their "side of the story" and recognize that failure to correct misreportings or inaccuracies in reporting, may

allow for a disadvantageous “shaping of the battlefield,” leading to the loss of public support and undermining their operational “theater plan.”

## CHAPTER II

### "CNN EFFECT" AT THE STRATEGIC LEVEL

In his article "*The Changing forms of Military Conflict*" Lawrence Freedman asserts that the armed conflicts of the future will more than likely be shaped by, not so much the military might of the world's larger powers, but more so, simply by the possibility of their intervention. An ultimate decision largely determined by *perceptions*. The most significant future developments in military operational art, he suggests, will come from the changes in the realm of international politics rather than from the advances in military technology.<sup>3</sup>

In order to understand Freeman's thesis and its specific application to the United States, one has to look at the underpinnings of the recent change in focus of our national military strategy and, more importantly, how we can expect our potential adversaries to respond to these changes. Two factors, which have worked to form our developing military strategy, have been the change in nature of the conflicts American forces are now confronted with and the advent of the "Information Age."

The face of war has clearly changed over the past few decades. The "traditional" concept of "total war" involving large, conventional forces seeking to win a war through a decisive victory has largely fallen by the wayside. These large "world-shaking" wars which were spurred on by deep seated hatred "caused by imperial competition, the rise of nationalism and fundamental ideological rivalries" and "given an unusually vicious character by the industrialisation of violence,"<sup>4</sup> Freeman suggests, were much more the exception than the rule. Many believed that this trend would continue until the overarching struggle between communism and capitalism was resolved, but with the dawning of the "Nuclear Age" and the

ultimate prospect of a war escalating into a nuclear holocaust, the major players turned to a more peaceful resolution. In essence, the “Cold War” marked the “demise of the immediate threat of total war.”<sup>5</sup> More precisely, the demise of clear threats to our national security.

Today’s troops concern themselves much less with conquering and holding ground but rather with attempting to maintain the peace between warring factions, restoring order to areas of instability, and providing humanitarian assistance to those in desire need. It is the nature of these “limited wars” that we expect to find ourselves engaged in for the foreseeable future, that pose no threat to the wellbeing of the average citizen. “Even when the danger is clear and present, the difficulties of mobilising democracies for war or deterrence can be substantial...With limited wars, it is much harder to ‘sell the threat’...”<sup>6</sup>

The ideological axiom of peace being “the norm” and a sober reluctance to engage in war for Western democracies, can be seen in our country’s developing national military strategy. With the advent of the Information Age came the possibilities championed by the proponents of the “revolution in military affairs” to finally achieve long sought goals. Our clear aversion to war and expressed abhorrence for taking casualties are plainly manifested in the development of the concept of “Network Centric Warfare.” The transcendent objectives being to win wars in minimal time, inflict minimal collateral damage and to suffer minimal casualties through the use of dominate advances in informational technology. Today this is evident in our predilection to use air power and standoff weapons and reluctance to commit ground troops to resolve military conflicts.<sup>7</sup>

With the United States emerging as the sole “world power” and possessing the most advanced conventional military capabilities available, few countries should be expected to engage her in a conventional war. Smaller countries involved in the majority of today’s



conflicts fully recognize that they lack the economic base or military might to wage war against the large Western powers such as the US. Many feel they even lack the resources to decisively defeat or coerce regional contemporaries. Recognizing this, many of these countries are apt to view the larger powers as a viable resource, for either themselves or their adversaries, to be tapped into to favorably alter the course of their regional conflicts. A beleaguered country should be expected to attempt to draw the Western powers into their struggle by bolstering their image as a hapless victim. A country holding the upper hand will look to deter the possibility of an intervention by attacking an obvious center of gravity of Western democracies – the will of the people. One way may be to give the perception that they are prepared to take casualties and that they will be resilient, playing to the fear of the Western people of becoming “bogged down in a hopeless, distant struggle.”<sup>8</sup> If engaged, they can be expected to portray the dominant Western powers as the “bullies.” Their strategies therefore often center on active “public-relations battles” and the manipulation of perceptions designed to garner Western attention. After all, “it is assumed that the way to Western decision-making is through the media and public opinion.”<sup>9</sup> Freeman concludes:

It is here that the information age and the new international politics come together to change the forms of conflict. Precisely because military engagements have become more discretionary for Western countries, belligerents must work hard to persuade them either to stay out, or to go in. Governments must pay close attention to the quality of rationales for both intervention and non-intervention. If battle is joined, operations will be judged against political criteria relating to casualties and collateral damage, justice and fairness. If conflicts involve persuasion as much as combat, there should be no surprise that their conduct has become *a branch of marketing*. (Italics added)<sup>10</sup>

## CHAPTER III

### “CNN EFFECT” AT THE OPERATIONAL/TACTICAL LEVEL

Recognizing the strategic aims of the prospective players on tomorrow's battlefields being geared towards fostering world opinion, or specifically directed at American public opinion, future operational commanders must be prepared to win the “war of words.” Historically, and as recently as the end of Desert Storm, the military has been able to exert some level of control over the media on the battlefield. Either through exclusion, first cut censorship, or regulation of the Pentagon Press Pool, the military had, at least in some instances, some influence over what the public ultimately saw. Since the war in Bosnia however, “...the first true TV war,”<sup>11</sup> as Paul Edwards quotes in his article, *“The Military-Media Relationship-a Time to Redress the Balance?”* a number of key factors have worked to shift the control into the hands of the media.

One factor, alluded to before, serving to broaden the media's influence on national and international public opinion has come from the recent and notable technological advances made in the communications industry. Today access to the media is almost universal:

In times of crisis or high drama America automatically turns to CNN. In bars, airports, aircraft, hotel lobbies, corner shops and anywhere else where people might pause and watch, the news pours out in a steady, heady stream.<sup>12</sup>

This globalization of the media, enabled through the use of sophisticated technology, allows for the horrors of the battlefield to be almost instantaneously brought into the living rooms of the public. The ongoing conduct of wars now is brought to the attention of just

about everybody, making for a better informed public, and arguably one with a greater propensity to exert its influence over politicians and the government.<sup>13</sup>

A related factor, perhaps more disconcerting, is the technological advances made in media recording systems and near-instantaneous communications equipment. These capabilities have enabled the reporter in the field a greater degree of independence from the military than ever before. With the advent of lightweight cameras and portable satellite dishes, reporters are able to transmit live reports to news networks from almost anywhere in the world. As Edwards points out, "this is a most important development for the media, since it significantly diminishes the military's ability to limit or censor its output...The umbilical cord of reliance on the Army has been cut."<sup>14</sup>

These technological advances in communication systems that allow a reporter to file his reports from almost anywhere within the area of operations and the globalization of the media have logically heightened the media's potential in "shaping the battlefield." With this in mind, the military commander must be aware of situations that may give the public the wrong impression. Misleading or biased reports, either as a direct product of an adversary's propaganda campaign, or those unwittingly created by the media may prove detrimental to his ongoing operations.

Often times the public's perception of the "big picture" is derived strictly from that bit of "truth" that the reporter is seeing and catches on videotape.

People blithely imagine that journalists are where the news is. Alas, not so; the news is where the journalists are.<sup>15</sup>

During the conflict in Bosnia there were a number of documented instances in which the warring factions deliberately manipulated the media by putting on "shows." In one such case, near an inter ethnic boundary called Turbe, it was asserted that news crews could

almost be guaranteed some action footage during quiet periods just by letting it be known that they were there. Relatively harmless incidents in which small arms were fired at UN armored vehicles conducting routine patrols along the border became “newsworthy spectacles.”<sup>16</sup>

A more brazen example of premeditated manipulation of the media was the mortar shelling of a market place in Bosnian held Sarajevo just prior to a Bosnian envoy’s visit to the UN in New York. Subsequent evidence suggested that Bosnian government troops actually did the shelling, hoping to pin it on the Bosnian Serbs, with the implicit hopes of getting the horrific images played at the “right political moment.”<sup>17</sup>

The failure of the military to effectively address this problem of the “news being where the media are” will result in them falling prey to “rash, illinformed public opinion at home, or worse, risk unbalanced international media reporting which has the potential to substantially destabilise the military situation.”<sup>18</sup>

The unintentional dangers a military commander must be wary of include the objectivity of the media. Though many reporters are often not restrained by military convention to certain areas, it is often hard for them to cross over from one warring faction to another and therefore may spend the majority of their time observing one side or another. Even experienced reporters can be emotionally caught up in the ghastly events surrounding them and wind up over-sympathizing with the faction they are cohabiting with resulting in “a quasi-Stockholm syndrome effect.”<sup>19</sup> The consequences of the resultant biased reporting Edwards points out “is almost always highly damaging in a Low Intensity Conflict/Peacekeeping Operation, since one side will often seek to exploit such reporting whilst the other will seek retribution.”<sup>20</sup>

The complexities of the "low intensity conflicts" that our forces are facing in today's world alone can create problems for military commander. The war in Bosnia well represented the ambiguous nature of today's conflicts with its changing and indeterminate alliances overlaid by a complex peacekeeping operation being carried out by a large number of diverse countries. "Nevertheless, TV reporters regularly had little more than 30 seconds to unravel the threads of this highly complex and confused situation and then simplify it in order for it to be digestible by the general public. Such reporting may distort the reality of the situation in the public's mind and can often lead to a lack of understanding of the military's role."<sup>21</sup>

Tantamount to the problems generated by the operational commander's inability to control what is being reported, is that of when it is being reported. This situation clearly lends itself to the potential for the operational commander and his subordinates being blindsided by reports from the field. An illustrative example of this would be the experiences the commander of Joint Task Force (JTF) 180 in Haiti was confronted with. When the mission to restore a democratic government changed from the planned "forcible entry" to one allowing for a "permissive" entry, hundreds of international journalists crowded the streets of Port-au-Prince and neighboring towns and were there to meet members of the XVIII Airborne Corps as they came ashore. It was at the twice-daily press conference that the JTF 180 spokesman was challenged by "questions about incidents that had just occurred in the streets, but had not yet been reported to the operations staff, let alone the PA staff."<sup>22</sup>

Another, perhaps more telling example, coming from the personal experiences of NATO's first commander, retired Admiral Leighton "Snuffy" Smith:

...the politicians who are giving you your guidance sometimes read the newspapers rather than the military reports. In all probability they get their newspaper first.<sup>23</sup>

## CHAPTER IV

### A CLOSER LOOK

At this point in the paper it is important to note that many of the arguments made heretofore are based on the premise that the "CNN Effect," in and of itself, has the influence to drive national foreign policy. In his review of *"Late-Breaking Foreign Policy: The News Media's Influence on Peace Operations"* by The Washington Times White House correspondent Warren Stroble, Norman Cigar states,

according to Stroble, the media can have an impact on peace operations only when there is lack of Presidential leadership, when a policy is weakly held or in flux, or when Congressional and public support is already lacking, with the media then merely exposing a policy vacuum. When on the contrary, a policy is clear, strongly held, and communicated well to the public and to Congress, the media follows along, rather than leading.<sup>24</sup>

In his case studies of four recent peace operations including Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Rwanda, Strobel found no conclusive evidence suggesting the media alone was responsible for a reversal in policy. Neither policy-makers nor the American public yielded solely to graphic images portrayed on TV. Policy makers clearly made decisions based on a numbers of factors other than the public's reaction to the media. As well, the public generally succeeded in objectively weighing the associated risks and benefits of that policy in giving or withholding their support.<sup>25</sup>

Conclusions drawn from Steve Livingston's detailed research entitled *"Clarifying the CNN Effect: An Examination of Media Effects According to Type of Military Intervention"* also support Stroble's contention that the public's emotive reaction to the media, alone, does not often propel changes to foreign policy. In his analysis he examines eight types of military

intervention ranging from conventional warfare, strategic and tactical deterrence, to peace making/peace keeping and all the way down the spectrum to humanitarian assistance. Of utmost importance in understanding the potential impact of the CNN Effect, Livingston expresses the need to “discriminate between foreign policies, each with its own objectives, means, potential and actual costs (measured in dollars, lives, and political prestige) and sensitivities to media and public pressures.”<sup>26</sup> Ultimately the persuasiveness of the CNN Effect is determined by the inter-relationship between all of these factors.

Livingston's analysis of the operations in Somalia provides an illustrative example of the dynamic interplay between the type intervention, foreign policy, the media, and public opinion. As he points out, from late 1991 to July of 1992 when our involvement in the worsening conditions in Somalia was limited to a variety of non-governmental organizations, the ICRC, and UN organizations, there was almost no media attention. In August of 1992 the operation took the form of a *consensual humanitarian* intervention when we began using military cargo aircraft to transport relief supplies, supported by a small security force. A decision, Livingston contends, that was almost purely driven by bureaucratic and political considerations. Media coverage dramatically increased at this time because of the involvement of military personnel and not because conditions had worsened. The continuation of fighting and acts of banditry surrounding the dissemination of food transformed the environment into something other than “consensual” and the Bush administration responded by deploying a Marine security force. The policy changed once again, now to an *imposed humanitarian* intervention with the media attention rising accordingly. By the summer of 1993, the mission began to take the form of a *peacemaking operation*, for which the forces in theater were not structured. Livingston states, “Whereas

humanitarian missions, strictly speaking, do not pursue political objectives...peacemaking missions do.”<sup>27</sup> It is here he suggests that the Clinton administration failed to build the necessary political support with congress and the American public to sustain a “more demanding political mission in Somalia.” He further concludes, “as a result, the policy was derailed in October 1993, as is often said, with the pictures of a dead American body on macabre display in Mogadishu.”<sup>28</sup>

As such, the routinely proclaimed profound influence of the CNN Effect to *drive* strategic level decision making is often over-stated. The media can however be a catalyst in the process and its importance needs to be fully recognized.



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The operational commander of tomorrow must be well prepared to enter into a wide array of politically sensitive operations whose ultimate success often relies more on world and American perceptions than military might. In order to guarantee those successes, he must appreciate the complexities of future "battlefields," including the potential racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity of its participants. He must be able to clearly and steadfastly convey to the outside observers, as well as to his forces and friendly parties within the theater, those overarching precepts that serve to support the legitimacy of his mission. So too, he must actively defuse the potentially detrimental impact of misperceptions generated from fortuitously inaccurate or misleading reports or from those reports directly manipulated by an adversary. To do, so he must develop an advantageous relationship with the media, based on consistency and trust. Recommendations to better prepare a future commander to "win the war of words" follow:

One recommendation to assist the operational commander in safeguarding international support, as well as national or coalition resolve and to thwart the damaging effects of an enemy's misinformation or disinformation campaign, is to form a robust "Information Operations "<sup>29</sup>(IO) cell. The commander of the coalition/joint task force (C/JTF) in "Operation Desert Thunder," a mission to deter Iraqi aggression towards Kuwait, assembled one such cell in early 1998. A similar cell was created by the US Army during an exercise in November 1998 called Division Advanced Warfighting Experiment (DAWE). Central players in both cells were representatives from Public Affairs (PA), Civilian Affairs

(CA), and Psychological Operations (PSYOPS). The goal of the cells was to develop an effective “perception-management campaign,” as described by 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division PAO, Mark Newell, in his article entitled “*Tactical-level Public Affairs and Information Operations.*” The implicit task was to ensure their commander and his subordinates “spoke with one voice” by working together throughout respective operations to coordinate and deconflict incoming and outgoing theater reports and messages. Through trend and content analysis of such reports, the IO cell would be able to assess the overall effectiveness of its concerted “perception” campaign and make refinements as necessary to ensure compliance with the commander’s intent.<sup>30</sup>

One tool specifically developed to assist an IO staff to effectively counter an adversarial propaganda campaign, initially experimented with throughout DAWE and further developed and refined by the IO staff during Operation Desert Thunder, was the “Information Operations Product/Action Worksheet.”<sup>31</sup> Comparable to the planning process used to develop a “Commander’s Estimate of the Situation,” the IO staff was able to produce a “quantifiable information objective, similar to a mission statement”<sup>32</sup> with associated courses of action and pertinent measures of effectiveness. Although “not perfect,” this coordinated IO worksheet allowed the IO staff to focus their efforts and generate fairly a comprehensive counterpropaganda campaign.

An additional benefit derived from such a comprehensive program is its potential for aiding the operational commander in his responsibility for the overall morale of his troops. Assuming the PA section of the cell is effective in portraying the theater commander and his IO staff as consistently doing their best to disseminate truthful assessments of situations, the

perception-management campaign “enhances the morale of the soldiers, reinforces the stated mission and supports accurate media reports for both soldiers and their families.”<sup>33</sup>

Finally, as Newell points out, the IO cell staff planners can provide a “positive and accurate account of operations to the media” by simply steering reporters to their CA and PSYOP counterparts. These personnel routinely work closely with representatives from the host nation, nongovernment organizations and private volunteer organizations, and are often tasked to assist with noncombatants and refugees in an affected area. Stories about these soldiers working closely with in-theater residents can obviously project a positive light on coalition efforts, promoting legitimacy in their involvement and countering enemy propaganda.<sup>34</sup>

The operational commanders of tomorrow must be prepared to actively engage a potential onslaught of reporters and journalists. Today’s journalists are much less likely to be satisfied with talking to an assigned Public Affairs Officer and often demand to speak directly to the operational commander making the decisions. The commander must therefore be well versed and comfortable in speaking and be able to quickly develop a trusting atmosphere. Certainly many future commanders will be articulate and naturally good at public speaking, some won’t, but probably all could benefit from focused training.

A second recommendation is to create and implement training exercises based on projected contingency operations for tomorrow’s commanders and their staffs and encourage interested representatives of the media to participate. One such exercise taking place in Suffolk, VA during the winter of 1997 and run by U.S. Atlantic Fleet, simulated an international peacekeeping operation called “Unified Endeavor.”<sup>35</sup> The premise was a peacekeeping operation staged in the mythical country of “Azure” which was in strife with

its secessionist province of “Turquoise.” The participants, over 700 military commanders, foreign ministers, and UN representatives, were confronted with a number of contemporary threats and issues including weapons of mass destruction, mass graves, refugees, war criminals, and more. Daily press conferences were simulated as well as news reports filed, often with a misleading slant or containing inaccurate details. Additionally “bad news” was periodically introduced via news bulletins. The primary purpose of the exercise being to teach the participating military commanders how to more effectively deal with and defuse potentially bad news by putting the proper “spin” on the situation. Many of this exercise’s staged events were based on actual lessons learned from Bosnia.<sup>36</sup>

Whereas the scope of this exercise conducted at the Joint Training and Analysis and Simulation Center concentrated almost exclusively on the military side of the equation, using military personnel to play the part of civilian reporters and cameramen, follow-on exercises should aim to incorporate actual media representatives whenever feasible. Not only would the staged press conferences be more realistic but so too the reported “facts.” Reviewing and analyzing the news and press releases generated by the reporters could provide both camps with more insight into where and why misunderstandings evolve, perhaps pointing out specific instances where errors are most likely to occur due to the cultural barriers separating the two.

Recognizing that the success of future military operations may largely rely on how they are presented to the “courts” of the international community and American public, a third recommendation is to re-establish a core course dedicated to the study of the military-media relationship into the Professional Military Education curriculum. Classes should be designed to teach future operational commanders’ the importance of developing a

comprehensive theater "perception" campaign to thwart the potentially injurious impact of the "CNN Effect." Material should be drawn from documented lessons learned from recent MOOTW experiences as well as practical exercises such as Unified Endeavor and DAWES as previously described. One key objective of such a course should be to ensure that students understand the dynamic interaction between specific types of intervention, the associated political objectives, and media considerations that all play a part in the potency of the "CNN Effect."

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Johathan Mermin, "Television News and American Intervention in Somalia: The Myth of a Media-Driven Foreign Policy," Political Science Quarterly, Autumn 1997 vol 112. no.3, quoted in Lawrence Freeman, "The Changing Forms of Military Conflict," Survival, Winter 1998/1999, 39-56.

<sup>2</sup> Seymour Topping, "The Military and the Media Suspend Hostilities," Columbia Journalism Review, March 1998, 58-60.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Freeman, "The Changing Forms of Military Conflict," Survival, Winter 1998/1999, 39-56.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 39-56.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Edwards, "The Military-media relationship-a time to redress the balance?" Royal United Services Institute for Defense Studies, October 1998, 43-49.

<sup>6</sup> Freeman, 39-56.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 39-56.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 39-56.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 39-56.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 39-56.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Moorcraft, "CNN-the New Emperor of International Politics?" The New Zealand International Review, August 1997, 6, quoted in Edwards, 43-49.

<sup>12</sup> Mackintyre, Ben. "CNN Breeds Nation of Junkies." The Ties, June 1995, n.p., quoted in Edwards, 43-49.

<sup>13</sup> Edwards, 43-49.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 43-49.

<sup>15</sup> R. Stewart, Broken Lives (London: Harper Collins 1993), 12, quoted in Edwards, 43-49.

<sup>16</sup> Edwards, 43-49.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Young and Peter Jesser, The Military and the Media, Basingstoke: Macmillian Press Ltd 1997) 199, quoted in Edwards, 43-49.

<sup>18</sup> Edwards, 43-49.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 43-49.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 43-49.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 43-49.

<sup>22</sup> Barry E. Willey, "The Military-media connection: For Better or for Worse," Military Review, December 1998, 14-20.

<sup>23</sup> John Donnelly, "Spinning: The Military's Other War," American Journalism Review, April 1998, 11.

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<sup>24</sup> Norman Cigar, "Examining the Media's Role," Marine Corps Gazette, January 1998, 73-74.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>26</sup> Steven Livingston, Clarifying the CNN Effect: An Examination of the Media Effects According to Type of Military Intervention, (Cambridge, MA: June 1997)1.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.,15.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.,15.

<sup>29</sup> Mark Newell, "Tactical-level Public Affairs and Information Operations," Military Review, December 1998, 21-28.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 21-28.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 21-28.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 21-28.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 21-28.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 21-28.

<sup>35</sup> Donnelly, 11.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 11.

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